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# MODERN LANGUAGE NOTES

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## THE STRUCTURE OF SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *CORIOLANUS*

The late Henry N. Hudson was a great admirer of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. He said:

I hold it to be among his greatest triumphs in organization: I cannot point out, I believe no one has pointed out, a single instance where the parts might have been better ordered for the proper effect of the whole; . . . the unity of impression is literally perfect. In this great point of dramatic architecture, I think it bears the palm clean away from both the other Roman tragedies; and indeed I am not sure but it should be set down as the peer of *Othello*.<sup>1</sup>

A German scholar, Heinrich Viehoff, is also positive that no drama of the master is superior to this in artistic completeness and effectiveness.<sup>2</sup>

Professor MacCallum thinks *Coriolanus* to be "technically and artistically a more perfect achievement" than either of Shakespeare's previous Roman plays.<sup>3</sup>

The question naturally arises: how far is the drama indebted to Plutarch for its unity and power? But one has only to read the two accounts side by side to see in what an endless variety of ways Shakespeare has condensed, hastened, unified, intensified, and supplemented the somewhat wandering story of Plutarch. Shakespeare himself is the real source of the intimate, vigorous dramatic life that permeates the play. He recasts his material more freely here than in *Julius Caesar* or *Antony and Cleopatra*. He improves

<sup>1</sup> *Harvard Shakespeare*, Ginn, 1881, Vol. XVIII, p. 180.

<sup>2</sup> *Jahrbuch der deutschen Shakespeare-Gesellschaft*, IV (1869), pp. 41 f.

<sup>3</sup> *Shakespeare's Roman Plays*, 1910, p. 479.

upon his original in the greater vividness of the characters and the closeness and skill of the interweaving.

Excepting Coriolanus himself all of the characters in Plutarch's sketch are faint and vague.<sup>4</sup> In Plutarch Menenius does not appear again after telling the fable of the belly and the members. The tribunes disappear after Marcius is banished. Aufidius is not mentioned until Marcius goes to his house, and is not present at the great scene between Coriolanus and his mother. Volumnia has nothing to do with the suit of Marcius for the consulship; and his solicitation for that office is not brought into any connection either with the war against the Volscians or with the banishment of the hero.<sup>5</sup>

That the speech in which Coriolanus announces himself to Aufidius follows Plutarch closely, and that "nowhere has Shakespeare borrowed so much through so great a number of lines as in Volumnia's appeal to the piety of her son"<sup>6</sup> are facts which easily mislead one as to the extent of the poet's indebtedness to his source. And the telling close of Volumnia's plea, which finally overpowers the hero, is new to Shakespeare:

Come, let us go.  
This fellow had a Volscian to his mother;  
His wife is in Corioli, and his child  
Like him by chance.—Yet give us our dispatch.  
I am hush'd until our city be a-fire,  
And then I'll speak a little.

(V, iii, 177-182.)

I must admit that the play seems to me defective at one point. In Plutarch the opportune and skillful recounting of the fable of the belly and the members by Menenius causes the plebeians to become reconciled to the patricians on condition that the people be granted tribunes with ample power. In the play, while Menenius is talking to one body of plebeians, another company obtains from the hostile patricians the concession that they may have tribunes to protect them. This granting of tribunes has no natural

<sup>4</sup> MacCallum, p. 494.

<sup>5</sup> Delius has presented in some detail the relation of the play to the source in *Abhandlungen zu Shakspeare*, 1889, I, 388-416. Reprinted from the *Jahrbuch* for 1876. See also the work of MacCallum.

<sup>6</sup> MacCallum, p. 484.

relation to the bread-riot which Shakespeare has depicted. The populace "ask for bread and get a magistrate."<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare makes the colloquy between Menenius and his audience supremely vivid and interesting. Hardly any serio-comic passage in the plays reads better. But because it is not made causative in any way, super-excellent as it is in itself, it is good *for* nothing. Surely this is an artistic mistake, an unfortunate alteration of the story of Plutarch.

The play has been criticized at another point. Coleridge felt that the treacherous Aufidius of I, x, who longs to wash his fierce hand in the heart of Caius Marcius, and the hospitable Aufidius, who welcomes to Antium his former enemy (IV, v), cannot be the same person.<sup>8</sup> I do not recognize any inconsistency here. The impulsive warmth with which the Volscian leader receives Coriolanus is natural enough, but it represents an attitude that cannot endure, both men being what they are. However, a recent scholarly study of the play seeks to explain how Shakespeare came to portray "two Aufidiuses," and makes this comment:

Aufidius is the weak point of the play. Dramatically, his function is to play in the second part of the play the rôle held by Sicinius and Brutus, the Tribunes, in the first, but to play it with more steadiness of hatred even than they, because Aufidius has to accomplish Coriolanus's death, while the Tribunes need only his exile. But whereas the Tribunes play the part to the life, . . . Aufidius is as impulsive as Coriolanus himself, and as evidently incapable of plotting as he. Instead of being plainer to us than Sicinius and Brutus, he becomes ten times as shadowy.<sup>9</sup>

I will call attention here to the whole-souled sympathy of approbation which the late Professor Barrett Wendell bestowed upon the character of Coriolanus. I quote a few expressions:

The people, . . . that great underlying mass of humanity . . . is presented in *Coriolanus* with ultimate precision. . . . The fate of Coriolanus . . . comes from no decadence, no corruption, no vicious weakness, but rather from a passionate excess of inherently noble traits, whose very nobility unfits them for survival in the ignoble world about them. . . . In *Coriolanus* we find Shakspeare, with almost cynical coldness, artistically

<sup>7</sup> MacCallum, p. 525.

<sup>8</sup> *Lectures on Shakspeare*, Bell, p. 310.

<sup>9</sup> "Coriolanus," *The London Times Literary Supplement*, July 27, 1922, 481 f.

expounding the inherent weakness of moral nobility, the inherent strength and power of all that is intellectually and morally vile.<sup>10</sup>

It makes one rub one's eyes to read such an estimate of the proud, intractable, passionate, self-destroyed Coriolanus.

Gustav Freytag pointed out that tragedies naturally fall into two classes. In one class, the action is initiated by the central figure, the hero; in the other type, some great opponent of the hero is the initiating agent, or some group of opponents.<sup>11</sup> Let us call these two contrasted kinds of tragedy the *Macbeth* type and the *Othello* type.

Each of these kinds has a characteristic danger. In a tragedy of the *Macbeth* type, the usual kind, the resolution or fall of the action, previous to the actual catastrophe, is apt to be somewhat distracting and lacking in interest. In general, we may say that the fourth act is likely to prove comparatively weak. Let us look into the reasons for this.

During the first part of *Macbeth*, or any play of that class, the hero monopolizes our interest. We see him boldly assert himself and reach out after some coveted prize; and our sympathy goes out to this challenging, aggressive leader. But at last he takes some fatal step, and we feel that his ruin has begun. The opposition to the hero, the counterplay, must now take the lead, since it is destined to destroy him. This opposition may have several leaders, such as Malcolm, Macduff, and the other nobles in *Macbeth*. Some of these leaders are likely to be almost new; none of them interests us in comparison with the great hero; and their number cannot compensate for their relative insignificance. The slow defeat of the hero is an unpleasant spectacle, and we have not yet reached the compensating intensity of the tragic close. Because the opposition now claims our attention, the leading character is apt to be absent from the stage for a time. In *Macbeth* the play travels off to England for a disproportionately long scene, and the hero is neglected; Hamlet is sent away to England, while the foreground is filled with the plotting of the King and Laertes,

<sup>10</sup> *William Shakspeare*, 1894, pp. 329, 330, 334. I have been much helped by this stimulating book, though here disagreeing with it.

<sup>11</sup> *Die Technik des Dramas*, 7te Aufl., Leipzig, 1894, pp. 93 ff. In the Eng. translation, Chicago, 2d ed. 1896, pp. 104 ff.

and with the pathetic ravings of Ophelia; in *Julius Caesar* Antony and Octavius are in power.

Indeed, the resolution of any play is apt to be somewhat lacking in interest, because of the fact that the outcome of the play has by this time been pretty clearly indicated and prepared for. All of us have something of the interest of a child or of an untrained spectator in the mere going on of the story, in the question how the affair will turn out; and, however well known the play is, we all take the point of view of one hearing it for the first time. The play loses something of its zest and charm when the progress of the action indicates plainly what the outcome will be. Especially in a great tragedy, the catastrophe has been clearly pointed out and arranged for by the time the fourth act is well under way. At this point, therefore, the audience is naturally disposed to dulness and lack of interest.

It is evident that tragedies of the type of *Othello* have an advantage at this stage of the action where tragedies of the *Macbeth* type are in danger. The action of *Othello* really begins with the plot of Iago against Othello and Desdemona, at the close of the first act; and from this point on that villain manages everything, while the Moor is the unsuspecting victim of his wiles. In the great third scene of Act III, Iago convinces the hero of the guilt of Desdemona. Othello, roused to fury, calls forth our most intense interest and compassion as he storms on toward the doom that awaits him. We are deeply stirred with sympathy during just that stage of the action which in *Macbeth* and similar tragedies tends to be distracting and weak.

Freytag says of tragedies of the Othello type:

It might appear that this method of dramatic construction must be the more effective. Gradually, in a specially careful presentation, one sees the conflicts through which the life of the hero is disturbed give direction to the hidden forces of his nature. Just there, where the hearer demands a powerful intensifying of effects, the previously prepared leadership of the chief characters begins; suspense and sympathy, which are more difficult to sustain in the last half of the play, are firmly fixed upon the chief characters; the stormy and irresistible progress downward to destruction is particularly favorable to powerful and thrilling effects.<sup>12</sup>

There is one portion of tragedies of the Othello type, however, which it is hard to make successful, and that is the complication,

<sup>12</sup> P. 96; in the translation (not followed here), p. 108.

speaking roughly the second act of the play and the first part of the third. Here the hero is passive, inert; others are plotting against him; he is ignorant of the true state of the case; he is deceived and hoodwinked. How shall we be interested in such a hero and sympathize with him? It has been said that there are communities to-day that would be inclined, in witnessing the drama, to sympathize with Iago rather than with Othello.

Shakespeare overcomes this great difficulty in the action of *Othello* by means of the character of Iago. He makes that officer such a subtle schemer, such a smooth and attractive deceiver, that we do not consider Othello either weak or foolish because he is deceived and led on to his ruin by the machinations of his pretended friend.

It is generally recognized that Iago is Shakespeare's most consummate villain, but it is perhaps not clearly seen that he had to be this, or else the play would be a partial failure. It is only because Iago is such a subtle and masterly villain that we can see him dupe the unsuspecting Othello without impairing our respect for that noble, high-minded hero. But there can be no question about the reality of the danger to which the play is exposed at this point, the danger that Othello shall appear a weak and unworthy character rather than one really tragic.

We see clearly that the Macbeth and Othello types of tragedy are the exact counterparts of each other. It is comparatively easy in a play of the Macbeth type to make the complication successful, but a difficult matter to make the resolution strong and effective. In a play of the Othello type the case is just reversed; the complication is for the playwright the more dangerous and difficult stage of the action; but throughout the closing half of the play the hero fills the stage, and the interest of the audience is assured. It is safe to say that the intense tragic power manifest in the second half of *Othello* is surpassed by nothing in the dramatic literature of the world.

*King Lear* has not yet been mentioned here among the illustrations of dramatic structure. The late Professor Price of Columbia University pointed out that the story of King Lear by itself "is only a psychological study." The fatal step of Lear is the laying down of his royal power. After that, he "is incapable of any action at all. He is simply driven, by force of circumstances,

as the result of the action already done, into deeper and deeper depths of humiliation and misery."

The pitiful story of the mad king, after the 1st scene of the 1st Act, was, as Shakspeare rightly saw, devoid of the true dramatic quality, and incapable of shaping itself into a real drama. This was the reason that led him, as I think, to supplement the story of Lear and Cordelia by the story of Gloucester and Edmund. . . . For the story of Edmund had in itself just what the story of Lear lacked, the definite dramatic emotion and the definite dramatic action. It was capable, therefore, of absorbing into itself the story of Lear's calamities, and of carrying it along with itself to a dramatic conclusion. As the result of this fusion, it is the study of Lear's character and the picture of his mental decay that form the pathos and the vital charm of the poem; but it is the passion and the action of Edmund, the rise and downfall of his fortunes, that supply the form of the drama and its dramatic movement.<sup>13</sup>

The Edmund story, the only complete, structural action in this play, is plainly of the Macbeth type. Macbeth and Edmund are both villain-heroes, each reaching out to grasp a forbidden prize.

In the action of *Coriolanus* there is no dead point. Every scene is vital, every character is both helpful and consistent, every element of the play contributes to an interesting, constantly developing unity of effect.<sup>14</sup> Why is it that this drama is pre-eminent among the plays of Shakespeare in these respects?

Two closely related actions make up the drama. The main action, the strife between Brutus and Sicinius, the leaders of the plebeians, and Caius Marcius, is prepared for at once in the outspoken bitterness of the common people toward their especial enemy. The second action, the contest between Marcius and the Volscians under Aufidius, is so closely involved with the first that it does not impair the unity. The play is not divided because of this second line of interest, it is enriched and enlarged. The interweaving of the two strands is intimate, complete. The character, the deeds, and the fate of Caius Marcius constitute the absorbing interest in which both actions are united.

The first war against the Volscians, in which Corioli is captured and Marcius wins his title 'Coriolanus,' is felt to some degree as a separate portion of the play. The Volscians begin this conflict,

<sup>13</sup> *Publications of the Modern Language Assoc. of America*, ix (1894), pp. 174-75.

<sup>14</sup> See Viehoff's article in *Jahrbuch*, iv, already cited.



but Marcius at once takes the leadership against them. Shakespeare represents him as the only Roman who foresaw and foretold this struggle; this gives him distinct pre-eminence.

*First Senator.* Marcius, 'tis true that you have lately told us;  
The Volsces are in arms. (I, i, 231-32.)

The energy with which Marcius throws himself into this war, his extravagant bravery and prowess in entering the gates of Corioli alone and fighting his way safely out, his winning of the city, his hurrying to the relief of the army of Cominius, his single-handed defeat of Aufidius and his companions, and the bestowal upon him of the proud title 'Coriolanus,'—all these things mark him as the active leader and hero of the war. We feel this portion of the story as a separate action of the Macbeth type.

This victory makes our hero the natural candidate for the consulship, in accordance with the heart's desire of his mother. He reluctantly asks the people to accept him as consul, to give their 'voices' in his behalf. In spite of his haughty manner they grant his request. The tribunes Sicinius and Brutus then induce the citizens to withdraw their assent. This will so enrage Coriolanus as to bring about his overthrow.

*Brutus . . .* If, as his nature is, he fall in rage  
With their refusal, both observe and answer  
The vantage of his anger. (II, iii, 266-68.)

The plot succeeds. Coriolanus is so angered by the fickleness of the populace that he demands that the grant to them of tribunes be revoked. For this proposal his death is demanded. Yielding to his mother's entreaty he tries to speak gently to the plebeians; but a new fit of anger overcomes him, he explodes in words that cannot be forgiven, and the doom of banishment is pronounced against him. As he departs into exile, he says ominously:

I go alone,  
Like to a lonely dragon, that his fen  
Makes fear'd and talk'd of more than seen. (IV, i, 29-31.)

Later he offers himself to Aufidius as an ally, and leads a Volscian army against Rome. The eloquent pleading of his mother saves the city from destruction, but leads directly to his own death at the hands of Aufidius and his friends.

This action of the tribunes against Coriolanus is distinctly of the Othello type, but it is strikingly free from the dangers to which that type is exposed. The plotting of Brutus and Sicinius is so skillful and so well covered up, it is so condensed, and directed so effectively to the weak points in the character of Coriolanus, that its plausibility is complete. Skillful as is the management of the plot in Othello, it is not so entirely plausible as the main action of this play.<sup>15</sup>

Thus the deft combination of what we feel to be an action of the Macbeth type with one distinctly of the Othello type gives to the whole play an intense and unremitting energy that it would be hard to parallel. The first portion of the play has the energy and success that mark an opening of the Macbeth type; the close of the play is of the Othello sort, and has the intense power which distinguishes an action of this kind. Our attention is fixed upon the hero at all times. He takes the lead both in his own exaltation and in his own destruction.

When Coriolanus gives up his revengeful purpose and yields to the entreaty of his mother, he wins our sympathy, and at the same time insures his own ruin. This moral victory gives pathos to the scene of his death, the close of the play. The heart of the spectator is uplifted and purified.

If *Coriolanus* is so admirable as a work of art, why has it never been popular? Professor A. C. Bradley points out that the drama has not the universality that marks the greatest tragedies, that it does not employ the supernatural, that nature is not treated imaginatively "as a vaster fellow-actor and fellow-sufferer," that there is no exhibition of inward conflict, and that there is "never such magical poetry as we hear in the four greatest tragedies."<sup>16</sup>

It is also true that the anti-democratic spirit of the play is displeasing to many.<sup>17</sup> The English-speaking nations, interested

<sup>15</sup> Professor E. E. Stoll, *Othello: An Historical and Comparative Study*, The University of Minnesota, 1915, holds that the plot of *Othello* is lacking in plausibility. He is partly answered by E. K. Chambers in *The Modern Language Review*, Oct. 1916, pp. 466-67.

<sup>16</sup> *Coriolanus* (Lecture before the British Academy), Oxford University Press, 1912, pp. 4-5.

<sup>17</sup> I have discussed this feature in the *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, XXIX (1914), pp. 285-86, 290.

in making the world safe for democracy, cannot sympathize fully with a play that flatly contradicts Plutarch's account in order to represent the Roman populace as completely fickle, incapable, cowardly, and subject to demagogues.

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### THE FORTUNES OF LAMARTINE IN SPAIN

Larra, in his review of Martínez de la Rosa's poems (*Revista Española*, No. 91, Sept. 3, 1833) remarks that the day of Gessner and Meléndez is passed in Spain, and that that of Lamartine and Byron has arrived. "Buscamos más bien," are his words, "*la importante y profunda inspiración de Lamartine*, y hasta la desconsoladora filosofía de Byron que la ligera y fugitiva impresión de Anacreonte."

The famous critic seems to have been somewhat impressed by the importance of the work of Lamartine to the then unformed Romanticism of Spain. When in 1835 he wishes to characterize the bucolic poems of J. B. Alonso, it is with Byron and Lamartine that he contrasts him (*Revista Española*, No. 484, Feb. 19, 1835),<sup>1</sup> and we meet so constantly collocations like "Chateaubriand y Lamartine," "Walter Scott, Casimir Delavigne y Lamartine," "Victor Hugo y Lamartine," that it is quite superfluous to cite references. To Larra Lamartine was certainly one of the foremost Romantic poets of the day.

But he had also been recognized in Spain as a leading Romantic

<sup>1</sup> "Examinemos el libro en venta, no ya comparando a nuestro autor con lord Byron o Lamartine, puesto que su género es tan distinto que difícilmente se le pudieran hallar puntos de contacto."

The collocation of Byron and Lamartine, which to modern ears sounds strange, may well be due to the latter's preoccupation with Byron. Cf. *Diario Mercantil de Cádiz*, May 6, 1827, where an anonymous writer even says of Byron: "El más sobresaliente de sus imitadores ha sido el francés La-Martine." An article in the *Revista Española* of May 23, 1834 (on the *Moro Expósito*), which some have thought to be by Larra, insists upon the essentially different character of the Romanticism of Byron and Lamartine.